

Strengthening Voices for Better Choices in Ghana

Enhancing forest governance capacities at national and community levels

Forest governance in Ghana

Ghana's forest sector is in the midst of an extended crisis. Weak institutions and a lack of regulatory control have created an environment in which illegal logging and deforestation are rampant. The loss of Ghana's forests is having profound ecological, social and economic consequences.

As the resource base shrinks, so local communities (the forest owners) are losing the forests on which they depend, without seeing any real benefits from forest exploitation. This is one cause behind widespread rural poverty. Similarly, the government of Ghana (the forest manager) is invariably failing to recover the rents from illegal forest activities, losing revenues it needs for national development. If governance reforms are not instituted soon, the remaining forests will no longer be able to supply the ecological, social or economic benefits on which Ghana has come to depend.

Strengthening voices for better choices

In response to these forest governance challenges, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) launched Strengthening Voices for Better Choices (SVBC). This global project, financed by the European Union, aims to promote the development and implementation of improved forest governance arrangements that facilitate sustainable and equitable forest conservation and management. Ghana, one of six SVBC project countries, is pursuing this goal at both national and community levels.

Nationally, SVBC aims to increase awareness and capacity to implement forest law enforcement, governance and trade (FLEGT)



Deforestation in Western Ghana in the region of the Upper Guinean Rainforest. IUCN Photo Library © Johannes Förster

measures stemming from regional and international initiatives. SVBC is contributing in particular to the development of a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) between the European Union and Ghana to prevent illegal Ghanaian timber entering European markets.

At the community level, SVBC is working to strengthen the forest governance capacity of community forest committees, the intermediaries between communities, the forest industry and government. Specifically, SVBC is helping to increase transparency in forest management, improve official responsibility and promote the development of legal forest products.

Besides supporting the VPA process and community forest committees, SVBC

is also building the capacity of stakeholders in government, industry and civil society to participate in and implement forest governance reforms more effectively.

SVBC is partnering with a wide range of Ghanaian and international organizations to realize these goals. It is working closely with the Forestry Commission of the Ministry of Lands, Forestry and Mines on the consultative processes and communications aspects of the VPA negotiations. In civil society its main partners include Forest Watch Ghana, Tropenbos Ghana, Friends of the Earth Ghana and the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana. SVBC is also maintaining close links with other organisations and projects promoting sustainable forest management in

Ghana, including IIED's national Forest Governance Learning Group, the Ghana Forest and Trade Network, and the FAO-supported National Forest Programme.

SVBC's achievements

National forest governance assessment

Together with its partners, SVBC in Ghana has made good progress towards its goals. As a first step, the project commissioned a national assessment report to review the state of forest governance in Ghana, focusing in particular on the role of customary forest law (studies have already been carried out on statutory law). This report has been completed and will serve as a baseline for future reforms.

Multistakeholder VPA process

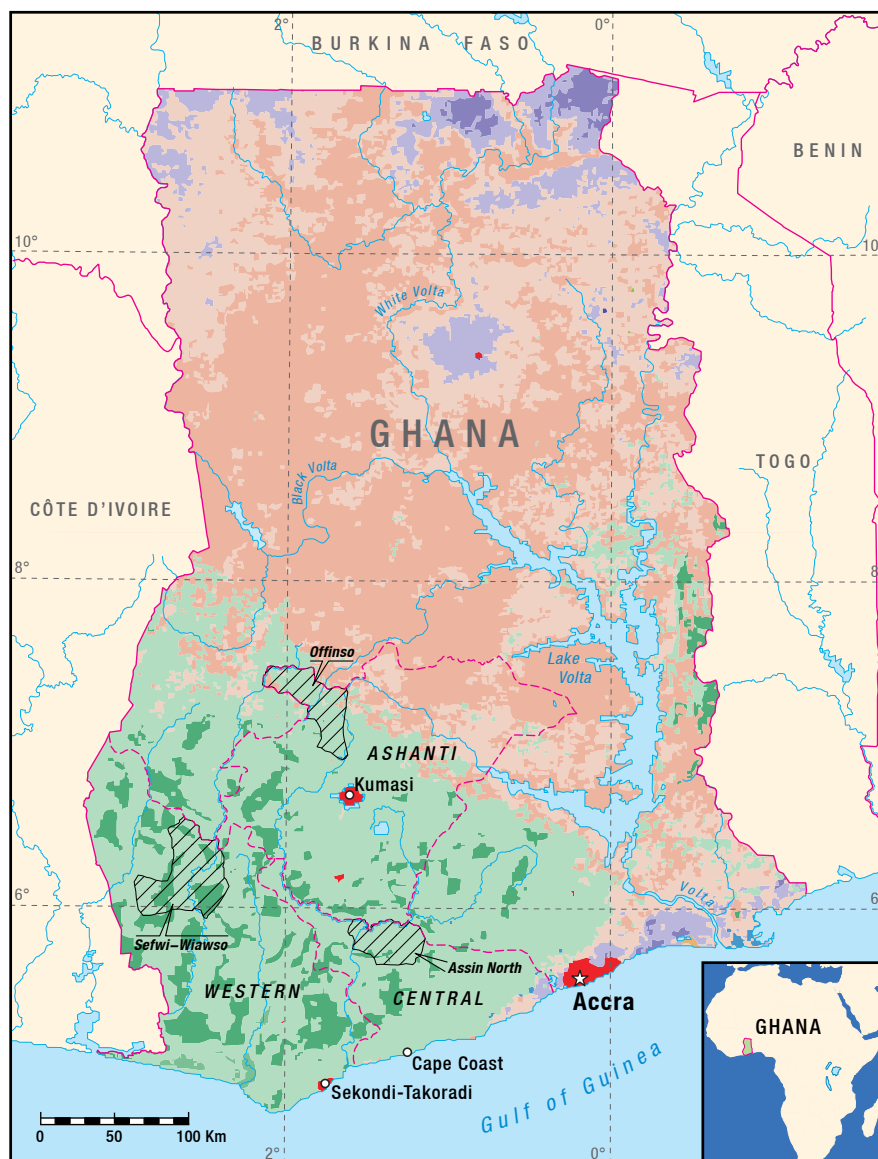
At the national level, SVBC has created a plan for the multistakeholder VPA consultation process. It has facilitated consultations with the private sector and civil society, and has supported twelve sensitization workshops with communities across the country. SVBC will continue to support the VPA process in coming months, assisting with the multistakeholder consultations and implementing the communications strategy it has prepared for the process.

The VPA, by defining and enforcing a definition of legal timber, and introducing timber tracking and licensing systems, has great potential for improving forest governance in Ghana. Once instituted, it should reduce the rate of forest loss while also generating greater benefits for local communities and the government.





















For these benefits to be realized, however, it is crucial that all stakeholders are consulted and communicated with during the VPA negotiations. This will allow Ghanaian

It is important to reiterate the need to develop a better understanding of: the potential benefits and risks of devolving decision making to the local level; the ways in which traditional/customary practices and national forest policies and laws can become more mutually supportive; and the potential role of the private sector in supporting such arrangements. There is also an important need to develop just and equitable approaches which will empower local stakeholders and make a tangible contribution to livelihood improvements. The IUCN SVBC project is designed to bring these to bear.

—Dominac Blay
Forestry Research Institute of Ghana



LEGEND

	SVBC pilot area		Closed evergreen lowland forest		Swamp bushland and grassland
	International boundary		Degraded evergreen lowland forest		Croplands (>50%)
	Regional boundary		Mangrove forest		Croplands with open woody vegetation
	River		Mosaic of forest and croplands		Irrigated croplands
	National capital		Deciduous woodland		Sandy desert and dunes
	Regional capital		Deciduous shrubland with sparse trees		Waterbodies
			Sparse grassland		Settlements

Land cover map of Ghana showing the SVBC pilot districts. Land cover is based on the Vegetation Map of Africa, prepared under the Global Land Cover 2000 Project (<http://www-gem.jrc.it/glc2000/>).

society to voice its needs and concerns as the VPA develops, ensuring broad support and ownership for the final product.

Overall, SVBC has enjoyed some success in helping the Forestry Commission with aspects of VPA development. At times, however, there has been some confusion about IUCN's specific role and responsibilities. IUCN has learned the importance of clarifying these at the outset of any partner-

ship to avoid future misunderstanding and misplaced expectations. Detailed terms of reference are one way of doing this.

Although the VPA negotiations are a national process, local stakeholders are also seeing benefits. For example, by involving forest communities in the consultations the process has increased their capacity to engage in forest governance reforms. This will enhance their ability to contribute to

future participatory reforms. And, once finalized, the VPA could create opportunities for communities to take part in activities such as forest monitoring. When such avenues of participation are institutionalized, communities will assume an integral role in governing Ghana's forests.

Community forest governance SVBC's activities at the community level have had varying degrees of success. The project has chosen three sites to pilot innovations in forest governance: Assin Akropong in Assin North district of Central region, Offinso in Offinso district of Ashanti region, and Sefwi-Wiawso in Sefwi-Wiawso district of Western region (see map).

In its first visits to these sites, SVBC found divergent understandings and interpretations of community forestry. To share

SVBC is a welcome development. The policy of community forestry has been with us for ages; the advent of this project will complement our implementation efforts and enhance the practices.

— Yakubu Mohammed
Ghana Forestry Commission's Takwa
District Manager, Western region

these perspectives and forge a common understanding of community forestry, the project organised and documented an inception workshop with government, civil society groups, communities and the media.

The township of Assin Akropong is the only pilot site to have a community forest. Here SVBC has facilitated a variety of activities, including marking forest boundaries with controlled fires, obtaining approval to harvest 30 trees for pilot conversion to timber, helping members of community forest committees to participate in forest policy training, and sponsoring a workshop on alternative livelihood activities (snail and

mushroom growing, beekeeping and rearing grasscutters, a popular edible rodent). SVBC hopes these initiatives will help communities generate income they can invest in future development projects.

Making progress has been more challenging at the pilot sites in Offinso and Sefwi-Wiawso, where there are no community forests. Here the lack of legal access to resources has limited activity by the community forest committees. At both of these sites SVBC has organized one-day workshops drawing a total of more than 50 participants from 24 different communities. These aimed to sensitize community members to the work of the community forest committees and identify ways to improve their functioning. The meetings spurred a renewed interest in the committees, but committee members still need extra resources (funding, communications, equipment, and so on) if they are to operate successfully. Looking ahead, SVBC will organize advocacy training sessions for the communities. It will also conduct forest governance workshops with District Assembly members and businesses to complement the training it has given to other stakeholder groups.

SVBC has found community workshops to be an effective way of opening discussions on issues lacking a shared understanding, and of developing a common vision for future work. The project has also come to appreciate the importance of ownership and access to resources in enabling local initiatives. It has been much easier to work in Assin Akropong, for example, which already has a community forest, than in the other two sites.

SVBC's efforts at the local level have helped to raise the profile of community forestry nationally in Ghana. By involving communities and other forest stakeholders in events and activities on community forestry, interest in this issue has revived. The Forestry Commission, for example, recently organised

IUCN has worked to facilitate better linkages between different levels of the forestry campaign. IUCN has been consistent and principled in demanding greater and more varied indigenous civil society representation on the Steering Committee set up by government to prepare Ghana for negotiations with the EU for a VPA. IUCN is necessarily independent of civil society because its membership includes not only civil society organizations but also governments and state agencies like the Forestry Commission. It has acted in consultation rather than in competition with Ghanaian civil society in not constricting our democratic space.

— Kyeretwie Opoku
Forest Watch Ghana (excerpted from
Aborvitae 32, December 2006)

a three-day workshop on community-based natural resource management with civil society and government representatives.

In many cases, using IUCN's partners to engage with local communities has proved an effective approach. An example is the support SVBC has given to member organizations of Forest Watch Ghana to conduct VPA community sensitization workshops. These organizations have established a certain trust and rapport with the communities, and can speak the local language.

Capacity building and information exchange

SVBC has contributed to training various stakeholder groups in forest law, policy and governance. The project began building capacity in 2006 at a national workshop on community forestry attended by about 40 participants. (This meeting was also used to launch SVBC in Ghana.) It has since organized training workshops on law, policy and governance for civil society, community chiefs and business representatives.

SVBC has enabled different Ghanaian and international actors to exchange FLEGT-related ideas and experiences. The project has twice supported Ghana's national VPA Coordinator to attend the Chatham House meetings in Britain on illegal logging. It has also provided opportunities for Ghana and Liberia to exchange information, sending four Ghanaian delegates to Monrovia to meet with government and civil society representatives. Their visit was followed by a reciprocal visit from Liberian government, civil society and industry representatives. Both sides benefited from these exchanges, and expect to maintain the relations they



Meeting between the European Union and civil society groups, March 2007. Photo © IUCN Ghana

formed into the future. In Liberia, the visits have contributed to the momentum for a FLEGT/VPA process similar to Ghana's.

Future activities of SVBC

SVBC has recently visited each of its pilot sites in Ghana to learn about their successes and challenges, and to chart a course for future engagement with the communities.

The project intends to support capacity-building activities (such as training workshops) at each site to empower communities to influence policy making at district and national levels. And, after the progress made at Assin Akropong with alternative livelihood activities, SVBC will continue to monitor and support similar activities and extend them to new sites.

In 2008 SVBC will capture the lessons it has learned and communicate them to deci-

sion makers involved in the relevant policy discussions. And, as Ghana's VPA moves from negotiation to implementation, SVBC will support activities involving communities and civil society in forest governance reforms. Lastly IUCN Ghana will continue to share ideas and lessons with other SVBC country programmes, so that a wider group of stakeholders can benefit from Ghana's experiences.

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Volunteers putting up a mushroom-growing house in Assin Akropong. Photo © IUCN Ghana



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